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# THE MIDDLE YEARS

BY ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

## I

Women in mirrors, I am told, may see  
The wings of beauty as, with anxious eye,  
They trace the legend of mortality  
And day by day watch the old magic die.  
In different wise, I in my glass behold  
The flight of what no springtime can replace,  
And start with terror of things grim and old  
When chance confronts me with my mirrored face—  
Where the long seasons have engraven deep  
So many an epitaph of satiric rhyme,  
And sent so many a flaming light to sleep,  
And branded immortality so with time,  
That where a stranger might see youth alone  
I view the ghosts of things that now are gone.

## II

This is the burden of the middle years:  
To know what things can be or not be known;  
To find no sunset lovely unto tears;  
To pass not with the swallow southward-flown  
Toward far Hesperides where gold seas break  
Beyond the last horizon round strange isles;  
To have forgot Prometheus on his peak;  
To know that pilgrim-miles are only miles.  
Then death seems not so dreadful with its night  
That keeps unstirred the veil of mystery.  
Then no acclaimed disaster can affright  
Him who is wise in human history  
And finds no godhead there to earn his praise  
And dreads no horror save his empty days.

## III

Not all my will can change this casque of bone  
That predetermines what each thought must be;  
And I have learned to bear with these my own  
Enforced defects and doomed futility,  
And with reproach no longer rack a skull  
Whose rigid plan, conditioned long ago,  
Left such low arches for the beautiful  
To pour its summer light through. Now I know  
Somewhat the measure of what may be done  
And may not by this child of a dark race  
Who in the long processions of the sun  
At last for a brief moment takes his place.  
I bid him bear his banner with the rest,  
Nor too much blame the dusk that haunts his breast.

## IV

I can more tranquilly behold the stars  
Than once I could. Their alien majesty  
Awakes in me no longer desperate wars  
Against their far indifference circling by.  
For I too have my orbit, and intent  
Upon its rondure I no less than they  
Decline the test of warlike argument.  
They go their several ways; I go my way.  
Nothing of all my hopes have they denied,  
Nor do I storm against them as of old.  
We pass, the sovereigns of an equal pride.  
Some day shall I be dead and they be cold.  
Until that hour, untroubled in our flight  
We seek our own paths through the spacious night.

## V

It thunders in the west, where the clouds roll  
Ominously; and as the winds arise  
Once more the lightnings cry out to my soul.  
How often have I stood with passionate eyes  
On some bare hilltop whence the miles of plain,  
By sudden flashes torn forth from their sleep,  
Were for an instant scrutable, till again  
Atlantis-like they sank to oceans deep.

And such is life's true image: no clear day  
On plain-lands luminous and defined and grave—  
But a wild dusk where flashes far away  
Swiftly illumine shores that from the wave  
Are for a moment lifted, soon to be  
Merged once again in the concealing sea.

## VI

What good, I ask myself, what fortunate thing  
Amid so many evils that we taste  
Do these strange years of middle-passage bring  
Where thief and rust and moth have so made waste?  
And as I count them over one by one,—  
Patience and prudence and more generous thought,—  
I see none here to match the great gifts gone,  
Nor any fit atonement time has brought.  
—Save perhaps one: the calm and certain will  
Whose baffled purpose still relentless goes  
Across the world, unconquerable still,  
Seeking the unknown goal that well it knows—  
Like a bleak eagle that with blinded eye  
Drives on its way across the wind-swept sky.